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Bleeding in:
Joanne Moar's
installation,
Becoming
German,
involved
collecting
childhood
memories
from
throughout
Germany.

Acquired memories

DAVID HAYWOOD talks to Canterbury-born Joanne Moar, a conceptual artist who is intent on becoming German.

I was born in Bavaria, Germany. As a child I enjoyed reading Karl May's stories about the German cowboy hero, Old Shatterhand, and his noble Indian friend, Winnetou. My favourite song was Wann wirs mal wieder richtig Sommer, sung by Rudi Carell. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, and whenever I smell anything mouldy I am reminded of them. As I grew older I became aware that they had been members of the Nazi Party, which made me feel very disillusioned," Joanne Moar tells you.

None of these statements is true. Despite the nature of her subject in *Becoming German*, and the fact that Radio Deutsche Welle recently described her as speaking German without a hint of an accent, Joanne Moar isn't German. She's a New Zealander, a native Cantabrian, born and raised in Lincoln. *Becoming German* is a project by this conceptual artist who continues to attract widespread attention in the German press, and has recently received a German Medienkunst (media art) award. Moar's work is clearly making a considerable splash in the German art scene.

She studied sculpture at the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts and exhibited some of her earlier works in New Zealand.

In 1995, she won a postgraduate scholarship to study at the prestigious Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf. Relocating her life to Germany, Moar studied under the renowned Czech artist Magdalena Jetelova. Since then, Moar

has exhibited throughout Germany, as well as in Japan, Poland, Slovenia, Britain and Korea.

For the past three years, she has been based at Cologne's Kunsthochschule für Medien.

Moar's works have often involved language. Her *First Hundred Words of the English Language* was an audiovisual installation on the theme of word acquisition.

Give it Up! featured a labyrinth constructed of mirrors printed with the words from a Kafka short story. She used ice as a medium for several of her earlier conceptual sculptures, until one of them spectacularly collapsed, and narrowly missed crushing a spectator.

"In retrospect, that project wasn't such a good idea," says Moar wryly.

By 2005 she had lived abroad for more than a decade. Her social network was based almost entirely in Germany, and she felt so at home in her new country that she would sometimes almost forget that she wasn't German. It was only when her friends would reminisce about childhood — their favourite games, television programmes or fairy tales — that she became aware of her own foreignness.

"I didn't share those common childhood memories of Germany. It would remind me that I didn't completely belong," she says.

This insight was the inspiration for a new work, *Becoming German*.

Moar became intrigued by the relationship between national identity and the shared memories of childhood. She reasoned that if she and Germany's

other seven million foreign residents had a more detailed knowledge of a typical German childhood, then they would also have a better understanding of what it meant to be German.

A grant from the North Rhine-Westphalia Art Foundation allowed her to realise her thoughts as an art project, developing the concept as a website which allowed visitors to donate or receive memories from a database through a series of questionnaires.

In addition to this, Moar travelled widely throughout Germany collecting memories through personal interviews.

"I saw this as being very much in the tradition of the Brothers Grimm, who collected fairy tales in a similar manner.

"The stations of my pilgrimage were in part determined by invitations to present the project in various exhibitions. In these exhibitions, I presented documentation of the journey, together with computer terminals for accessing the database. The computers were exhibited on typical German school furniture."

Moar gathered several hundred memories through her interviews, and more than 10,000 were collected via exhibitions and her website.

Not all childhoods are happy. This is reflected in some of the memories donated to *Becoming German*. Depending on your date of birth you might receive a German childhood that experiences Allied air raids, or recalls beaches on the Baltic sea covered with the bodies of dead soldiers.

Ironically, however, Germany's unfortunate history might be part of the reason

that Moar's work has generated so much interest.

"Germany still has an enormous collective guilt for the Nazi period. This makes it difficult for Germans to express national pride.

"You seldom see a German flag flying from a house. Even graduation ceremonies aren't considered acceptable.

"*Becoming German* gives people the chance to experience a sense of national identity without being nationalistic. By accessing the childhood memories of their fellow Germans people can enjoy a positive acknowledgement of their national culture."

Does she see the possibility of internationalising her project?

"*Becoming Kiwi* is an idea that I'm toying with. I'm visiting New Zealand next year, and it would be an interesting project to do there because it's such a diverse country, particularly with the recent immigration from South-east Asia.

"Many Germans have expressed interest in experiencing a childhood on the other side of the world. But the primary attraction of the project is that it provides a new avenue through which New Zealanders, including myself, can engage with our own collective childhood memories and cultural roots."

□ David Haywood is a Christchurch-based writer.

□ Joanne Moar will be the artist-in-residence at the Arts Centre of Christchurch in February-March 2007. Her project *Becoming German* can be found online at <http://www.becoming-german.de/>